There are two recent developments in RE that teachers have been talking to us about. We asked Janet Dyson, Series Editor and RE Consultant, to give us her perspective and tell us about her recent publishing, *Living Faiths*.

The latest Ofsted Report on RE: Realising the Potential and the recent All Party Parliamentary Group Report on RE highlighted that 50% of teachers of RE in secondary schools are not specialists in the subject.* For non-specialists teaching RE, there are a number of challenges, the greatest being how to cope with the extensive body of subject knowledge needed to teach and assess RE confidently and well.

I’m the Series Editor on *Living Faiths* and set out to create a set of resources that would help meet some of the challenges outlined in the reports. I’ve enjoyed working on the *Living Faiths* series because, as an RE teacher and teacher trainer, I recognise the importance for resources to capture the interest of students whilst supporting teachers’ needs. We have carefully designed the *Living Faiths* student books, teacher guides and digital resources on Kerboodle to help teachers develop confidence and build their subject expertise, improve their knowledge of world religions and how they are practised today, and of the diversity of practice within and between religions.

**Coping with the challenges**

1. **Subject knowledge**

While working on the *Living Faiths* series, one of our biggest challenges was how to support the many non-specialist teachers who were teaching RE at Key Stage 3. Lack of detailed subject knowledge was the biggest problem and it was difficult to find resources that would help teachers to feel secure in their teaching of RE. It would have been so useful to have something like the *Living Faiths Teacher Guide*, which gives a concise overview of each unit to help teachers prepare and access resources in advance. We made sure we included key concepts and ideas, and shared links to a wide range of resources so teachers can find practical yet creative tasks. This level of guidance on planning and delivering the activities gives teachers confidence in preparing lessons, answering students’ questions correctly – something lots of non-specialist teachers worry about - and intervening effectively, or pointing students in the right direction so that they can find out for themselves, using the range of *Living Faiths* resources.

We interviewed 18 families of different faiths and personally, I found it a fascinating experience to hear first-hand how real young people practise their faith in Britain today. We made sure the film clips of the case study families are bite-sized, so that students can easily engage with the materials, yet strengthen their subject knowledge. Through the film clips, students can experience personal insights into how faith affects the way real people live.

2. **Approaches to teaching RE**

When you’re unsure of the subject you tend to play safe and avoid taking risks! We tried to counter this by giving good support to teachers through this series, encouraging them to try out some lively approaches to RE which are clearly introduced in the *Student Book* and *Kerboodle*, and explained in the *Teacher Guide*. We developed useful and practical guidance...
on strategies for developing students' higher level thinking, engagement in enquiry, creativity, and reflection. The 'further suggestions' pages in the 
Teacher Guide provide a wide range of imaginative suggestions for tasks, and ways of differentiating teaching, for example, raising the level of challenge for more able students. In the Student Book, colour-coded activities focus on developing different skills/ways of thinking, and are structured to support progression and differentiation.

3. Lesson planning

Teachers said they wanted lots of support for lesson planning, so we designed each Student Book unit with that in mind. With clear and specific learning objectives, and a short starter activity to get students thinking, we hope this would spark off ideas and get them interested in the lesson. We also included a final reflection in each unit to help students consider the beliefs and practices they have learnt and how they link to their own lives and beliefs. Useful words are defined and a range of interesting and challenging activities to develop various skills such as 'think like a theologian, philosopher, social scientist' provides a basis for written responses, research or class discussions.

More than that, we carefully considered what to include in the Living Faiths Kerboodle so that the materials could boost both teacher and student confidence. Ready-to-play lesson presentations complement each unit in the Student Book and link directly to all the resources for the lesson, including film clips, interactives and worksheets, together with extensive teacher notes, so that teachers (especially non-specialists) can quickly plan and teach an effective lesson.

4. Assessment

Assessment is one of the biggest challenges for non-specialists, so we made sure to include strong support to help teachers in assessing students' attainment and progress. Assessment for learning strategies are built into every lesson, and learning objectives for each unit and assessment task are written in student-friendly language. All the assessment tasks include success criteria so that students understand what is expected of them. Self- and peer-assessment opportunities are supported by 'I can' statements. In addition, the online auto-marked tests, assessment task presentations and worksheets, together with a digital mark book and reporting function ensure that assessment information can be managed effectively.

Overall, Living Faiths has been a really exciting series to work on and I thoroughly enjoyed my experience with the authors — we worked hard to design the series to help all teachers develop their skills and to help students gain a strong grounding (and interest) in the subject, and successfully progress. I hope that all this means we could help you introduce your students to the liveliness of RE!

Best wishes,

Janet Dyson
RE Consultant

*According to the APPG Report RE: The Truth Unmasked, over 50% of teachers of RE in secondary schools have no qualification or appropriate expertise in the subject.

To find out more about Living Faiths, and try out some resources for free, visit
www.oxfordsecondary.co.uk/livingfaiths